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ABSTRACT

Articles in this newsletter issue examine the experiences, strengths, and problems that Amerasian refugees from Vietnam have had while living in the United States. Topics of discussion include discrimination, educational difficulties, resettlement experiences, and cultural difficulties. The concept of cluster site resettlement, a possible solution to helping Amerasians meet their specific needs by helping them identify with each other and offer mutual support, is examined. Additionally, a statistical breakdown is given of the size of the Amerasian population, their location, their educational background, and their marital status. Finally, the issue of reuniting Amerasians who have arrived from Vietnam with their real fathers is discussed, focusing on the complications inherent in this type of search process. (GLR)

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THE AMERASIANS

DONALD A. RANARD AND DOUGLAS F. GILZOW

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Amerasian Cluster Sites
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The Amerasians

by Donald A. Ranard and Douglas F. Gilzow

Their backgrounds in Vietnam are more complex and their experiences in the U.S. more varied than some accounts have indicated . . .

In Vietnam

EARLY REPORTS about Amerasians in Vietnam described them in the worst of circumstances, creating a stereotype that has been difficult to dislodge. "From what I'd read in the papers, I thought that they were all horribly abused," says a volunteer tutor in a program for Amerasians. "It turns out that some were, but others grew up in stable families and went to school just like everybody else."

The conditions of Amerasians in Vietnam vary widely, making generalization difficult. According to a 1988 report by *Indochina Issues*, "Some have lived in abject poverty, on the very margins of society; others are accustomed to a standard of living significantly above that of the average Vietnamese citizen." Most lived somewhere in between—closer to poverty than prosperity, certainly, but not without at least the basic necessities of shelter, food, and clothing.

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Fears of persecution

When the communists took over South Vietnam, many mothers of Amerasians feared the worst. A mother interviewed for a 1985 study on Amerasians by the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) recalled, "Panic everywhere and fear . . . . Most terrible of all, rumors that the Viet Cong planned to kill all Amerasians and torture their mothers, pulling out their fingernails. Some said that all Amerasians would be tossed into the sea." While some mothers spirited their children off to relatives in the countryside and others left them in orphanages, most kept their children with them. "I told myself, 'OK if we die, we die together!' " one mother said. Others went to extraordinary lengths to disguise or hide their children: "I dyed my daughter's hair black, put soot on her face and cut off her eyelashes," one mother recalled. "And I kept her hidden under a blanket all the time in the house."

The worst never happened. Despite fears of reprisals and later reports of discrimination, there is no evidence of a government policy of persecution against Amerasians and their mothers. There were government efforts to send Amerasians to farm in the new economic zones; but local enforcement generally was not strict, and only a minority of Amerasians and their mothers spent time in the zones.

Before the communist takeover, most mothers had worked in South Vietnam's service economy—as cashiers, waitresses, laundrywomen, office workers, interpreters, or bargirls. When the communists assumed power and the flow of U.S. dollars abruptly stopped, the service economy collapsed. The mothers, like thousands of others in South Vietnam, had to find another way to support themselves and their families.

Those who could not rely on support from relatives often became street vendors. "I made shopping bags, sold fish sauce, all kinds of things to make money," a mother of two Amerasian daughters is quoted in a 1983 *Indochina Issues* article. "All of us [wives of Americans] were selling things. There was no way we could work for the government. To do that you need a good resumé. If you have mixed-race kids you won't be able to."

In spite of economic hardship, most mothers managed to keep their families together. Indeed, circumstances in Vietnam sometimes served to forge an unusually close relationship between mother and child, notes J. Kirk Felsman, a Dartmouth psychologist researching Amerasians' adjustment to the U.S. "In some cases, it was the only close relationship either had," he says.

Among Amerasians who grew up with other relatives or in foster families, some were treated as one of the family, while others were little more than servants. Phuoc, a 17-year-old unaccompanied minor living in Falls Church, Virginia, fondly recalls the Vietnamese family who adopted him after he was abandoned by his mother in 1975. With 11 children, the family was poor, and Phuoc had to quit school after a few years to help out in the streetside family shoe repair business. But he was happy. "They treated me just like a son," he says, adding that his dream is to reunite one day with his family.

In contrast, 18-year-old Dai, who lives with his mother and brothers and sisters in Richmond, Virginia, is visibly upset as he talks about his life growing up with distant relatives in a small village a day's drive from Ho Chi Minh City, where his mother worked as a vendor. He spent his childhood cutting sugar cane for his relatives and other villagers, unable to attend school with the other children. He speaks about that period of his life with great reluctance. "It was very frustrating," is all he will say.

Education

Dai belongs to the relatively small minority of Amerasians who received no education—13%, according to both the 1985 USCC study and more recent data collected by Felsman. Statistics collected by the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) in the Philippines Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) estimate that around 7% of Amerasians at PRPC have no previous schooling. Most Amerasians report about six years of education, JVA officials say.

"The widespread belief that Amerasians have been prevented from attending school in Vietnam seems largely unfounded," concluded the USCC study, adding that poverty, rather than policy, has been the biggest barrier to education for Amerasians.

A mother of four children—two fathered by a Vietnamese husband and two by an American—

details the arithmetic of survival: "Say you'd make fifty *dong* a day," she is quoted in the *Indochina Issues* article. "You'd have to spend thirty *dong* for rice, twenty for other food. There was nothing left to buy medicine . . . If your children go to school, first you have to pay for books. And now they make the pupils pay for repairs to school buildings and furniture . . . ."

For many Amerasians, the chance to earn money kept them out of school. Sometimes "work" meant scavenging through garbage. "Every day I left our house early to search for plastic bags to collect, clean, and resell to the vendors," said one boy interviewed in the USCC study. "It was messy. I had to crawl underneath houses to get them—but then the people in the house would get mad and dump hot water on me. So then I would just look through the garbage piles. By the end of the day I could earn about five *piastres* to give to my mother. But I was always lonely all day . . . ."

Discrimination

While few mothers of Amerasians claim the government discriminated against them, many say they experienced insulting or unfair treatment. Ridicule is most often mentioned, though some say they were denied a job or social services. "In 1979 my Amerasian daughter was terribly sick, vomiting blood," a mother interviewed in the USCC study recalled. "The local hospital refused to treat her, saying, 'She is American. Let the Americans cure her!' This made me crazy, and I hated the Vietnamese. I struck the group leader, and for this they put me in jail for three days . . . ."

On the other hand, some mothers say they experienced no discrimination at all. In the USCC study, 30% said they were not discriminated against. Some even reported friendly treatment: "[M]y district leader was always nice to me," one mother said. "I had to do manual labor digging irrigation ditches three times each year—but everyone did that."

Like their mothers, Amerasian children report varying degrees of discrimination. Some complain of ridicule from teachers and classmates. The racial epithet *my-lai* ("half-breed") is a common taunt. (Contrary to press reports, the term *bui doi*—"dust of life"—is not a racial insult used to describe Amerasians. Rather, it is used to describe any homeless person. Thus, only the small minority of homeless Amerasian "street kids" are called *bui doi*.)

Some Amerasians became targets of anti-American feelings, especially in the years immediately following the war. "They [teachers and

BLACK AMERASIANS

Discussing Vietnamese attitudes toward black Amerasians, an American who worked in Vietnam during the war recalls an experience that illustrates how at least some Vietnamese feel about black Amerasians.

"My wife and I had decided to adopt an orphan," he says. "We wanted to adopt a child with a handicap, knowing that it was unlikely that anyone would adopt such a child. When we talked to the people at the orphanage, they said, 'fine,' and brought us a black Amerasian who seemed normal in every way. We asked them what the handicap was. They told us, 'She's black.' "

By almost all accounts, black Amerasians have had more than their share of problems in Vietnam. The USCC study found that nearly one-third of black Amerasians had no schooling in Vietnam, compared to 13% of white Amerasians. While black Amerasians didn't report discrimination more often than white Amerasians, they were more than twice as likely to claim "unfair" treatment in school. In his research, Felsman has found that black Amerasians were more likely to have been in fights in Vietnam. The fighting was generally in response to racial taunts.

students] would always taunt me, 'You don't belong in Vietnam. Why don't you leave?' " a boy in the USCC study recalled. "Or they would point at me, make me stand up in class, and say, 'Your father dropped bombs on our people!' I would come home crying, until I finally stopped going at all."

Others, however, remember untroubled, even happy times in Vietnam. Thuy, an 18-year-old Amerasian who finished high school in Vietnam, says she still misses her friends two years after leaving her country. "Everybody said she was pretty," her mother says. "And the teachers liked her because she studied hard. The only problem was keeping the boys away."

The amount of discrimination Amerasians and their mothers experienced depended in part on where they lived in Vietnam. "If they lived in areas controlled by northerners, they were more likely to have problems than in places like Saigon, where the population was southern and people were used to Americans and Amerasians," says Bill Herod, director of the Washington-based Indochina Project.

Another factor was the social background of the mother. Nguyen Ngoc Bich, multicultural program coordinator in Arlington, Virginia, disputes the commonly held notion that the Vietnamese, a racially homogeneous people, dislike mixed-race children. Discrimination against Amerasians and their mothers is more a question of class than race, he says. "In fact, many Vietnamese feel that mixed-race kids are *more* attractive and intelligent," Bich says. "It all depends on the social background of the mother—if she's upper class, people will feel a lot differently about her and her child than if they think the mother is a prostitute."

Coming "home"?

A recent newspaper article on the new Amerasians legislation appeared under the headline, "Our Kids are Coming Home." It is a generous sentiment, reflecting the sense of responsibility and spirit of welcome that many Americans feel towards Amerasians. But Amerasians are not "our kids" and they aren't "coming home"—they are Vietnamese young adults coming to a new and unfamiliar land for which their American genes offer no special preparation. "When I was in Vietnam, I felt more American because of how I looked," says one Amerasian. "But when I came here, I felt more Vietnamese. My language, the food I eat, the way I think, the way I do—it's Vietnamese."

In their adjustment to a new and very different culture, Amerasians will experience many of the same problems that other refugees and immigrants have faced. Their biological heritage will not spare them the ambivalence that most newcomers feel, as exhilaration and high expectations are gradually tempered by a sense of loss—for friends, relatives, and community left behind—and by an awareness of the struggles they face. For Amerasians, as with all newcomers, arrival in the U.S. marks the end of one difficult journey—and the beginning of another. ⊠

In the U.S.—
A Range of Experiences

"EVERY case is different," says Rose Marie Battisti in Utica, New York, responding to a question about the adjustment of Amerasians to the U.S. "About the only generalization you can make is that you can't generalize."

Most service providers share Battisti's reluctance to generalize about the experiences of Amerasians in the U.S.: Their numbers are too small (as of May 1989, only 1,000 Amerasians and their family members have been resettled under the new Amerasian legislation), their arrivals are too recent, and their experience is too diverse. For these reasons, this report—based on a recent telephone survey of service providers* and interviews with others involved in Amerasian resettlement—does not try to provide a picture of the typical Amerasian experience. Rather, it describes the range of experiences that Amerasians have had thus far, and indicates, within this range, some apparent trends and similarities.

Comparisons

The Amerasians entering the U.S. since the passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act in March of 1988 are different from their counter-

*See the box on page 5 for a list of survey respondents.

parts who preceeded them in 1983–85. For one thing, they're older. Nearly all service providers in the cluster sites noted the age difference. Because they are generally four years older than the Amerasians who arrived in 1985, they tend to be more mature in some ways. But the earlier arrivals did better in school—most enrolling at a young enough age to complete requirements for a diploma.

Service providers in cluster sites—areas selected for Amerasian resettlement—also agree that problems tend to surface more quickly with this group. One agency said that family problems are apparent immediately—one family announced they were throwing out two daughters after only two weeks here. On a more optimistic note, Peter Donahoe of Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia adds, "One difference is that we are able to deal with them better. We have the experience with the Amerasians who came four years ago and learned from that."

How do the Amerasian young adults compare with other Vietnamese refugees of the same age? Most respondents said they were reluctant to generalize, but that in several respects, the two groups were similar. "Their physical health is typical for Vietnamese refugee arrivals, and as for mental health, there are no big aberrations," says Marilyn Breslow in Richmond, Virginia. And both groups must grapple with the same problem of becoming adults while adjusting to a new culture.

Service providers identified several differences between the two groups, as well. Despite some evidence indicating that most Amerasians have about as much previous education as their Vietnamese peers, nearly all respondents said that Amerasians seem to have considerably less. Many also said that Amerasians appeared to be "less mature" and to lack "impulse control."

Many—but not all—service providers said that Amerasians are having more trouble adjusting to the U.S. "The main difference is in the families," Breslow says. "Nearly all our cases, 12 so far, are having problems—family members are just not supporting each other." In part, this is because the family members in many cases had not been living with each other in Vietnam, but were assembled into a group for resettlement in the U.S.

According to Marybelle Schipper in Grand Rapids, Michigan, "Most problems arise when the Amerasian is not accompanied by the person who was the caregiver in Vietnam. . . . Some have been newly re-united with the mother for resettlement, and these have a lot of problems. The stability of the home life affects everything else." Other service providers agree with Schipper, and their observations are supported by a 1985 study conducted by the United States Catholic Conference, which found, "If the Amerasian's prime caregiver did not accompany the Amerasian to the U.S., the family is three times

Survey Respondents

Articles in this issue of *In America* are based in part on results of a telephone survey conducted in April and May 1989. The following individuals participated:

Arizona

Phoenix: Maureen Webster, director of social programs and services, Catholic Social Services

California

San Jose: Sister Marilyn Lacey, director of migration and refugee services, Catholic Charities

Massachusetts

Springfield: Joanne DiCarlo, resettlement director, Refugee Resettlement Program, Catholic Diocese

Michigan

Lansing: Patricia Hepp, director, Refugee Services, Catholic Social Services

Grand Rapids: Marybelle Schipper, case manager, Church World Service

Missouri

St. Louis: Anna P. Crosslin, executive director, International Institute

New York

Utica: Rose Marie Battisti, executive director; Nho Tran, administrative assistant; Sharon, Eghigian, ESL teacher; Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Oregon

Portland: Salah Ansary, refugee program director, Lutheran Family Services

Pennsylvania

Philadelphia: Peter Donahoe, caseworker/career counselor, Migration and Refugee Resettlement, Catholic Social Services

Utah

Salt Lake City: Sherman Roquiero, state refugee coordinator, Department of Social Services

Virginia

Richmond: Marilyn Breslow, director, Refugee Resettlement Program, United States Catholic Conference

Washington, D.C., metropolitan area

Patricia Arnold, volunteer coordinator, Project Homecoming: Voluntary Agency Consortium for Amerasian Families (Associated Catholic Charities of Washington DC, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran and Refugee Services, Travellers Aid, World Relief Refugee Services, and Christian Refugee Outreach)

as likely to experience a 'case breakdown' (that is, a situation in which one or more members split off for alternate placement)."

Service providers also report that there have been several unwanted pregnancies among newly arrived Amerasian women—not a large number, but more than with other comparable groups of refugees. This could be due to the problems of inter-generational conflict, which several mentioned, an act of defiance against an over-protective parent. Or as Sister Marilyn Lacey in San Jose, California, suggests, it could be due to these women having grown up without the basic security provided by the traditional family structure.

Still, not all families have problems. Service providers in some locations cite instances of very warm, supportive relationships in Amerasian households. Most of these families are characterized by a continuity in relationships: The caregiver in the U.S. was the caregiver in Vietnam, the children in the family have been raised together and, if there are Amerasian siblings, they have the same father.

What strengths do Amerasians bring to the resettlement experience?

As a balance to the descriptions of problems and difficulties, service providers were asked about Amerasians' positive qualities. The following is a sample of their responses:

- **"They have remarkable survival skills, and are not as dependent as other refugees—if kicked out of the house, they can find another place."**
- **"They are more open and say how they feel. They tell you when they're angry or lonely. They'll cry. They do better in counseling."**
- **"They have a lot of motivation. Also, it is comparatively easy to find good sponsors for them. Americans are very sympathetic to the plight of the Amerasians."**
- **"Most are eager to work. They are used to working in Vietnam, and they don't resent it here."**

Work, school, or both

There are several factors influencing the Amerasians' entry into the workplace, high school, or training programs. Opportunities for employment or special training programs vary, voluntary agencies have different resettlement approaches, and the Amerasians themselves have a variety of preferences.

As might be expected, the younger they are and the more previous education they have, the more likely the Amerasians are to enter high school. The situation in St. Louis is perhaps typical. "If under 17, they generally go into high school," says Anna Crosslin of International Institute there. "Those over 17 go through adult ESL, some vocational training, and then to work or a work-and-study combination toward a GED, depending on previous education and decisions reached during counseling." Since the legal cut-off age for high school enrollment varies from state to state, so does the likelihood of the 17- to 22-year-old Amerasian being placed in a secondary school. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, for example, unless the refugees have very little previous education, they enter the high school bilingual program. "With counseling, each Amerasian makes the choice for him- or herself," says Marybelle Schipper.

"Right now, Amerasians outnumber other Vietnamese in the bilingual program. This is partly because it just takes more time before they can be integrated into mainstream programs."

In other locations, employment first is the norm. "Because they are older, they don't fit into the high school scene," comments Sister Lacey in San Jose, California. "Previous groups had a better chance to make it in school, less of a deficit. . . . The current ones are much more eager to work right away." In Richmond, Virginia, "most of our Amerasians are over 17 and have little previous education," says Marilyn Breslow. "There just aren't any positive rewards for them in school, so almost all hold full-time jobs. They're earning $4 to $5 per hour doing painting, metal work, bed assembly, etc." Several sites report that those who work are also pursuing other training options, such as vocational programs or GED classes. "Our greatest concern is for the long range," says Maureen Webster in Phoenix, Arizona. "Too many are in entry-level jobs without much future."

Being accepted and making friends

Service providers in the cluster sites said that, as far as they could tell, the reception from resettled Vietnamese refugees varied from indifference or avoidance to acceptance and taking on sponsorship or volunteer responsibilities with Amerasian cases. "At first, their friends are the people they have a lot of contact with—other Amerasians," says Patricia Arnold in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. "After a while, they get to know other Vietnamese refugees in their communities. It takes longer to get to know Americans because of language, culture, and lack of exposure—not because of a lack of interest on the Amerasians' part. In fact, almost all of them very much want to make friends with Americans." Psychologist Felsman notes that those Amerasians scoring well on various psychological measures frequently have "all kinds of friends," while those in more obvious distress tend to have only other Amerasians as friends. black Amerasians tend more than others to report having no friends at all.

Several service providers were concerned that Amerasians are mixing with other "at risk" elements among the earlier resettled Amerasians and Vietnamese, friends who are "not such great role models." In some communities, as Patricia Arnold has found in the Washington, D.C., area, "by and large, the older generation in the well-established Vietnamese community is not so friendly toward the Amerasians, but many of their sons and daughters, now young adults, want to understand and help them." Several service providers mention the support that young Vietnamese have shown for the Amerasians, and in those sites, Vietnamese university students and young professionals are acting as tutors, volunteer "buddies," and leaders in support groups.

Expectations, identity issues, and social problems

Service providers noted that the overseas training program may help tone down some Amerasians' expectations, but most are still unrealistic. Some arrive expecting extra money, special treatment, or immediate enrollment in educational programs. Sister Lacey says that the "dust" children have become "gold" children. "They have received a lot of attention," she says. "As a result, they feel better about themselves. On the other hand, they expect that every American they meet is going to be interested in them." According to Patricia Arnold in the Washington, D.C., area, for many Amerasians the biggest surprise about life in the U.S. is how expensive things are, and how difficult it is to make ends meet.

Several articles in U.S. magazines have focused on the Amerasians' "split identity." Identity problems vary a great deal from one individual to another, service providers caution, and most Amerasians are at an age when identity issues are a normal focus. "A lot just haven't decided who they are," says one service provider. "Sometimes they play this to their advantage, and use it in a tight spot. With the Vietnamese, they might say, 'I'm American—I don't have to listen to you.' With Americans, they say, 'I'm Vietnamese—I don't understand.' "

Several service providers point out that identity issues are particularly troublesome for black Amerasians, who are "not fitting in with either the American black groups or the Vietnamese." Problems have also come up when parents of white Amerasians have forbidden their children to associate too closely with black

Amerasians. In one extreme case, a black Amerasian and a white Amerasian in the Midwest eloped to escape parental disapproval and returned after the marriage was an accomplished fact. The parents eventually reconciled—but not before the police had been called to calm them down. On the other hand, some black Amerasians have been adjusting successfully. In Utica, New York, a black will be the first Amerasian to graduate from community college. "I came here to do well," he says.

What about social problems? Most sites reported that Amerasians were not experiencing serious difficulties, but it may be too soon for such problems to have surfaced, since the Amerasians have been in the U.S. less than a year. At other cluster sites, there have already been a small number of serious problems, such as attempted suicide, arson, and prostitution. Although these cases involve only a small minority of the Amerasians, they require a great amount of attention from teachers, counselors, and social workers.

"Most problems arise when the Amerasian is not accompanied by the person who was the caregiver in Vietnam."

Finally, it should be noted that behavior problems are certainly not irreversible. In a dramatic instance in an East Coast community, a young Amerasian was expelled from school for pulling a knife on a fellow-student on a bus. Later he was diagnosed as suffering from a learning disability, and he was placed in a special, slower-paced program, where he is now "doing well, making amazing progress," said the resettlement worker. "He was even the featured speaker at a parade held by Vietnam Veterans to honor Amerasians." ⊠

Mothers of Amerasians

Different backgrounds, similar problems

"WHEN I'm asked by sponsors what to expect of the mother in an Amerasian household, I always tell them, 'She's going to be a real character,' "says a sponsorship coordinator in Virginia. "They are survivors, they have strong personalities, and each is unique."

Beyond that, it is difficult to generalize, say many service providers,* noting that mothers of Amerasians have a wide range of backgrounds and resettlement needs.

Most service providers say that the stereotype of Amerasians' mothers as former "bargirls" is unfair, that the mothers come from a range of backgrounds. Many were clerical workers, interpreters, vendors, or housekeepers, they report. According to a 1985 study of Amerasians in the U.S. by United States Catholic Conference, prior to 1975, 31% of the mothers worked in nightclubs or restaurants, 25% were vendors, and 13% were housekeepers. The study also found that the average length of time the mothers lived with the American father was two years.

Perceptions at the cluster sites vary. One service provider says, "The mothers seem aggressive and can be quite demanding, and, yes, we've seen some of that 'bargirl' behavior." Another disagrees, saying, "Not all the mothers are aggressive and outspoken—many seem to be just having trouble with the problems of being a single parent."

Service providers note that, despite their different backgrounds, many mothers of Amerasians share a particularly difficult set of problems. Many lack job skills and have little previous education—six years or less of schooling in Vietnam, they say. Many must deal with the challenges of adapting to the U.S., being a single parent, and coping with young children as well as with rebellious Amerasian teen-agers.

"There are inter-generational conflict problems which have been exacerbated by the Amerasians' problems," says Anna Crosslin in St. Louis, Missouri. The problems are manifested in

*See the box on page 5 for a list of survey respondents.

different ways. In some families, mothers and their teen-aged children argue constantly. In extreme cases, the Amerasian child may leave home altogether, even if it means dropping out of school and finding a job.

Service providers are divided about the nature of the mothers' difficulties with their children. About half of those interviewed say that there is some truth to the generalization that these women lack parenting skills. They say that many of the mothers do not have discipline over the children, tend to be overprotective, or operate with a double standard, insisting that their children follow strict rules of behavior while they themselves entertain boyfriends, gamble, and drink. Other service providers stress that individual mothers' parenting skills vary, largely depending on whether or not the mother has been the caregiver throughout the child's life. These service providers also say that mothers of Amerasians are like other refugees in that their childrearing skills are more appropriate to their homelands; they are just not familiar with U.S. standards and practices, and they find it difficult to handle offspring who are quickly adopting "U.S.-style" behavior.

The relationships between mothers and their Amerasian offspring are often "intense and full of ambivalence," says psychologist J. Kirk Felsman. "Sometimes it's been the primary relationship either one had in Vietnam. Lacking other supports but having their own intense needs, some mothers have a difficult time letting go, as the Amerasians begin responding to the cultural pull towards autonomy that is so much a part of adolescence in America."

At the 11 resettlement sites surveyed, newly-arriving mothers of Amerasians generally took part in ESL and other training opportunities for only a short time, if at all. In most instances, they were looking for employment or already on the job within six months of arrival in the U.S. At eight of the sites, the majority of the women were in entry-level jobs—at sewing factories, in the hospitality industry, or assembly line work.

Social isolation can also be a problem. "Mothers of Amerasians are under more pressure, and are more isolated in the community since they are in a separate social category," says Sherman Roquiero in Salt Lake City, Utah. "Others in the Vietnamese community tend to look down on them." The problem of isolation is not experienced by all the women. "Other Vietnamese refugees are judgmental of some of the women, but they seem to be judging these people on a case to case basis," Peter Donahoe in Philadelphia says, "more on the basis of social class and behavior than because of any prejudice against the Amerasian child."

The stereotype of Amerasians' mothers as former bargirls is unfair. Many were clerical workers, interpreters, vendors, or housekeepers.

In Salt Lake City, mutual assistance association efforts have been effective in assisting these women and integrating them into the Vietnamese community, Roquiero says. Other cluster sites have arranged social visits for individual women to get in touch with others who are coping with similar problems. Salah Ansary in Portland, Oregon, says that service providers there hope to revive a refugee women's project in which American volunteers were matched with refugee women, especially those who were home-bound. "The volunteers helped them out, taught them English, and relieved their fears about the world outside," he said. Similar projects are being attempted elsewhere, but not always with success. One service provider says, "We've tried, but with the mothers working full-time, it's difficult to get them involved." Others agree that mothers of Amerasians are not easy to reach. ⊠

Amerasian Cluster Sites in the U.S., by State

Alabama: Mobile
Arizona: Phoenix, Tucson
Colorado: Denver
Connecticut: Bridgeport
Florida: Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa
Georgia: Atlanta
Hawaii: Honolulu
Idaho: Boise
Iowa: Cedar Rapids, Davenport, Des Moines, Sioux City
Illinois: Chicago, Springfield
Kentucky: Louisville
Massachusetts: Amherst, Boston, Springfield
Michigan: Grand Rapids, Lansing
Minnesota: Minneapolis, Moorhead
Missouri: St. Louis, Kansas City
New Hampshire: Concord
New Jersey: Newark
New York: Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica
North Carolina: Greensboro, High Point
North Dakota: Fargo
Ohio: Cincinnati
Oregon: Portland
Pennsylvania: Erie, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh
Tennessee: Memphis
Texas: Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston
Utah: Salt Lake City
Virginia: Richmond, Roanoke
Vermont: Burlington
Washington: Seattle
Washington, D.C. area

Source: Bureau for Refugee Programs, U.S. Dept. of State, 6/2/89

Amerasian Cluster Sites

PROFILE

Nguyen Thi Phuong, Mother of an Amerasian

Fifty-four-year-old Nguyen Thi Phuong and her 20-year-old Amerasian daughter, Thuy—both graduates of the Bataan training program—live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in a low-rent housing complex in Richmond, Virginia.*

The contrast in personality between the two women is striking: Phuong is friendly, outgoing, and confident, while Thuy, who looks and acts several years younger than her age, is soft-spoken and timid. Both women work as housekeepers at the same hotel. "That way if there's a problem, I'll be there," Phuong explains.

At the time of the interview, Phuong and her daughter had been in the U.S. for two months. Thuy was absent for most of the interview.

The interview began with Phuong showing me a 20-year-old picture of Thuy's father and a business card with this message on it: "Keep this card as it has my telephone number. You may need it when you get to the U.S."

I met him at an army base. He was a helicopter pilot. I was working there as a waitress at an American restaurant, a steakhouse. He liked my cooking, especially *cha gioi* (spring rolls). Sometimes I tell my daughter, 'That's why we had you—because your father loved *cha gioi.*" *(Laughs)*

We stayed together 18 months. He left in 1969, but he wrote and sent money until 1975. After that, I never heard from him again. When he left, I went to Saigon, to stay with my mother and family. Big family—16 people! And I was the only one working. I worked in the market, selling fruit, vegetables, all kinds of things.

When the communists took over in 1975, I was really scared. I thought they'd give me a hard time—you know, because I was with an American. I volunteered to go to the new economic zones—I thought they'd be easier on me if I volunteered. It was terrible there! You worked hard all day, then slept in an open hut—no sides and a dirt floor. And all we had to eat was rice and salt. After 36 days, I asked to go back to Saigon, and they gave me permission.

In Saigon, the authorities were always trying to get my money. Some people would tell them, "I have no money," but they never believed you if you said that. You had to be smart. I gave them a little bit of money and said, "This is all I have." And I was selling fruit on the street all day, so they figured I must be poor. After a while, they left me alone.

My daughter went to school for a few years, but I took her out because some students started calling her names—*my-lai, my-lai* ("half-breed"). I don't like anyone to call my daughter names! I sent her to a school for sewing, and later she got a job as a seamstress. By then, it was just the two of us—I just couldn't afford to support so many people. I earned enough to buy rice, Thuy bought vegetables.

Every night I dreamed that one day I would come to America. When I got off the plane, I felt like I was reborn. Right away I got a job. It's hard work, but that's OK. If I stay home, I get sick—My body doesn't want to stay home. In Bataan, they told us it's better to work. They're right. I don't like welfare. People without hands or fingers, OK, let them take welfare. But not for me.

So far I haven't had any big problems. One day, though, I got lost coming home after work. Every place looked the same. I walked around for *two hours*—didn't see anybody. I got really scared—I thought maybe something bad had happened to Thuy. Then I saw a man lying on the ground, under his car, fixing it. I told him I was lost. When I showed him my address, he pointed to my house. It was only two blocks away! Two hours I walked, and I was only 5 minutes from home!

The weather? Doesn't bother me. I like the cold. I feel better. When it's hot, my blood pressure goes up. When it's cold, my blood feels good. *(laughs).*

I don't think about the future, just go day by day. One thing I hope: I hope Thuy can see her father some day. A few days after I came to the United States, I asked USCC to contact him for me and tell him that he has a daughter in the United States. They found out that he has a wife and children. I won't contact him—he can contact me if he wants to. Thuy doesn't know about the call. I tell her, 'Your daddy will come see you soon.' Thuy, she wants to see her daddy very much. But I don't care for myself. I've been alone 19 years."

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

Cluster Site Resettlement
How Does It Work?

"WHERE are you going to live in America?" an ESL teacher asks an Amerasian student at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center. "I don't know yet,"is the reply. "I don't have a sponsor yet."

Seventy-five percent of the Amerasians leaving Vietnam are "free cases" like this one; that is, they do not have relatives in the U.S. This means that a "match" must be found for these cases, a link-up between a sponsoring agency in a U.S. community and the Amerasian family in the camp. In routine cases, this U.S. community can be just about anywhere, but with Amerasian cases particular care is taken to place families in one of approximately 50 designated cluster sites. (See map and list of locations on pages 10 and 11.) As with all other refugee cases, the State Department's Reception and Placement Office of the Bureau for Refugee Programs approves the placement and monitors the initial resettlement (30 to 90 days) of Amerasian refugee cases.

Cluster sites were selected for their ability to meet the specific needs of Amerasians.

Sponsorship and resettlement approaches vary among voluntary agencies and from one site to another. Sponsorships of Amerasian cases in Richmond, Virginia, for example, are mostly by church congregations, while those in Philadelphia have mostly been agency sponsorships. And in the unique case of Iowa, the state assumes the sponsorship role. Numbers of Amerasians to be resettled at each site vary from 150 or fewer in such places as Mobile, Alabama and Tucson, Arizona to over 500 in the Washington, D.C. area. (Note that these numbers include those accompanying the Amerasian.)

What the designated cluster sites have in common is that all have some experience in resettling Amerasians. They have a "demonstrated capacity to perform case management and follow-up services," and all have Vietnamese translators and interpreters available. In addition, there was an attempt to select sites with the programs and services to meet the specific needs of Amerasian cases—after-school tutoring programs, youth programs, and special counseling services for both the children and their mothers. Availability of affordable housing and appropriate jobs was also an important factor.

The advantage to the cluster site approach is obviously an increased assurance that adequate resources will be available. An added benefit, says Marta Brenden, national contact point for voluntary agencies in the Amerasian resettlement program, "is that clustering the Amerasians allows them to identify with each other and offer mutual support." This is particularly evident in the smaller cities. Marybelle Schipper attributes the low rate of secondary migration out of Grand Rapids to the city's size. "The Amer-

asians run into each other when they go downtown or to a shopping mall," she says. "A few have gone to Chicago but then returned because it was just too big and impersonal."

Extra program funding for each cluster site is limited to a $35,000 per year grant from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and this is to be used for community resource development and coordination. As a result, programs for Amerasians at the cluster sites make use of volunteers and existing resources. Typically, the voluntary agencies in a community hold community-wide orientation sessions for the service providers who will be most affected. These include employment service providers, public schools, refugee mutual assistance associations, adult, youth, and family social service providers, Vietnam veterans groups, community colleges and universities, the local police, and churches.

Clustering allows Amerasians to identify with each other and offer mutual support.

One exceptional program for Amerasians is in Utica, New York. Designed to meet the needs of Amerasians in the area, the Youth Employment Service (Y.E.S.) program provides services to all refugee youth between the ages of 16 and 21. Young adult refugees are enrolled in this program during their first week in the U.S. and stay in it until employment is found (usually within six months), or they are enrolled in high school, after two or three weeks of assessment. Y.E.S. program participants attend ESL classes, cultural orientation, and job club, five days per week from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Training in sewing and soldering is offered at the program site, as are afternoon tutoring services for those in high school.

Few other cluster sites can match the services offered in Utica, but all are working to meet the Amerasians' needs. Several cluster sites have hired coordinators to help launch additional services to be provided by volunteers. These coordinators help recruit, organize, and supervise volunteers who provide tutoring, social contact, and other supportive assistance to the Amerasian households.

Linkage between the U.S. cluster sites and the Overseas Refugee Training Program is important. Each cluster site has been requested to assemble community orientation packets of information, pictures, and maps, for use in the overseas training program. The U.S. resettlement sites receive information about individual Amerasian cases and their training through the refugee profiles which accompany all young adult refugees and graduates of the Preparation for American Secondary School (PASS) program. In addition, the Refugee Service Center at the Center for Applied Linguistics gives presentations upon request, and representatives from the Overseas Refugee Training Program and the Training Office of the State Department's Bureau for Refugee Programs act as advisors to the Amerasian Resettlement Program. Since December 1988, Marta Brenden has issued a monthly newsletter, "Amerasian Update," to keep voluntary agencies and other organizations informed of developments within the U.S. and overseas. ⊠

*The Amerasian Refugees from Vietnam: Some Statistics**

Number of Amerasians entering the U.S.

About 10,000, including Amerasians and accompanying family members, are to be admitted in the 1989 federal fiscal year, and the number is expected to be higher in the 1990 fiscal year. Prior to the 1989 fiscal year, Amerasians and family members admitted numbered about 11,000.

Accompanying family members

Most Amerasian resettlement cases include two or three other family members besides the Amerasian—some cases are as large as nine or ten. Amerasians are with their mothers in 75% of all cases. Note that the mother may not have been the Amerasian's caretaker in Vietnam.

Age	Gender
14–16 years old: 24%	male: 53%
17–22 years old: 72%	female: 47%
over 22 years old: 4 %	

Marital status

Although only 6% of those over 17 say that they are married, several sources indicate that this percentage is probably low: A number of Amerasians who say they are single in fact may be married. Since Amerasians can exit Vietnam only with members of the immediate family, they generally may not bring both their mother and their spouse. Some who are married decide to bring their mothers rather than their spouses. They tell Vietnamese authorities and U.S. interviewers that they are single, and leave their spouse behind.

Urban/rural

As of February 1989, about 75% of those leaving Vietnam were of an urban background. It is expected that the percentage of rural Amerasians will increase as a result of the Vietnamese government's recent efforts to register those in the countryside.

Educational background

In contrast to service providers' impressions that Amerasians have little or no previous education, Amerasians tell JVA interviewers that they generally have six or more.

Years of previous education	13- to 16-year-olds	17- to 22-year-olds
0	7%	6%
1–5 yrs	40%	41%
6–10 yrs	53%	46%
10 yrs +	0%	7%

Program placement at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center

In the Preparation for American Secondary Schools Program:

Beginning:	97%
Intermediate:	3%
Advanced:	0%

In the adult ESL/CO/WO program:

Level A	(Unable to read or write any language/no English):	11%
Level B	(Able to read and write native language/no English):	82%
Level C	(Able to read and write native language and English):	5%
Level D	(More proficiency in English):	2%
Levels E and above:		0%

*Based on statistics provided by International Catholic Migration Commission and Joint Voluntary Agency in Manila, February 1989.

Amerasians at Risk in Public Schools?

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WHILE Amerasians are a diverse group with a wide range of strengths and vulnerabilities, a substantial segment of Amerasian adolescents (ages 13–17) appears to be at a higher risk for poor adjustment in the public schools than their Vietnamese refugee peers.

This conclusion is drawn from an ongoing study initiated at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC). Amerasian students in the Preparation for American Secondary Schools (PASS) program were compared with their Vietnamese peers in the program in November of 1988. There were three indicators that Amerasian students may be more likely to have difficulties in U.S. schools: fewer years of prior formal education, lower scores on tests of native and English language literacy, and the expression of lower expectations concerning education.

At first glance, Amerasians seem to be similar to other Vietnamese adolescents in their educational background. Seventy-five percent of the Amerasian sample in the study indicated they had completed up to 7 years of school in Vietnam, and 74% of the other Vietnamese PASS students indicated that they had up to 7 years also—not much difference. However, there was a significant difference in the reporting of *no* formal school experience in Vietnam. Only 2% of the Vietnamese in the study said they had never been to school before. In notable contrast, 13% of Amerasian PASS students said they lacked formal school experience.

There were also striking differences between the two groups' performance on native and English language literacy tests developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics and used at the PRPC to assign refugees to classes at the appropriate English proficiency level. Only 6% of the Amerasian sample placed above the beginning level in PASS. In contrast, 43% of the Vietnamese sample scored above this level.

A third indicator deals with expectations and values placed upon education. In a question regarding education, 28% of the Vietnamese PASS sample reported that "School and studying means very little to me." In contrast, 46% of the Amerasian sample felt that this statement "describes me very well." The personal meaning of such a statement to an individual is open to interpretation and may reflect a combination of past experience, individual values, and self-esteem. Still, this significant difference is a clear indication of adolescent Amerasians' greater uncertainty or indifference towards education.

Amerasians may be more likely to have difficulties in U.S. schools

It is certainly inaccurate to assert that all Amerasians are at high risk for school failure. However, it seems clear that Amerasians as a group may be at an increased risk for poor adjustment in the public schools when compared to other Vietnamese refugee youth. The enrollment of these Amerasian adolescents in schools in the U.S. cluster sites signals a renewed call for flexibility, sensitivity, and patience in assessing these students and meeting their needs. ⊠

PROFILE

Nguyen Van Thong, an Amerasian Teenager

SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD Nguyen Van Thong and his mother, Lien, live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in a low-rent neighborhood in suburban Maryland, a few miles outside Washington, D.C. Thong is Amerasian, the son of an American civilian who worked at Saigon's Ton Son Nhut Airport. A framed photograph of his father—showing a heavyset, middle-aged man wearing an Australian-style bush hat—sits on a cabinet in their living room. But neither Thong, who was born after his father left Vietnam, nor his mother shows any interest in contacting him. "He's got a wife and children," says Lien. "I don't want to disturb him."*

Thong and his mother laugh as they recall their first day in the U.S. "We had an uncle in New Orleans," says Thong, speaking English slowly, carefully: He is someone who doesn't like to make mistakes. "We called him to tell him when our plane was going to arrive. When we arrived, he went to the airport to meet us. The only problem was, he went to the airport in New Orleans and we flew into National Airport [in Arlington, Virginia]. See, we thought the U.S. was just like Vietnam. We thought there was only one big airport."

Lien becomes serious as she recalls other, more serious problems her family has encountered during their five years in the U.S.

In 1984, a year after the family arrived in the U.S., Thong's older brother and sister dropped out of high school. Years earlier in Vietnam, both had quit school after five years of education. "It wasn't discrimination," Lien says. "The school was in our neighborhood and all their classmates were friends. They just didn't like singing songs about Ho Chi Minh."

In 1983, four years after they had dropped out of school in Vietnam, the two teenagers—the boy was 15, the girl was 14—found themselves back in a classroom, this time in the very unfamiliar setting of an American high school. With less than an elementary school education and without benefit of PASS training—the overseas training program for high school-aged refugees didn't begin until 1985—they despaired of ever catching up. After she quit school, Thong's sister began dating an older Vietnamese man, eventually moving out of her house and into his apartment. Thong's brother worked at a series of low-paying jobs.

School in the U.S. was a lot less difficult for Thong, who arrived at age 11 with six years of education in Vietnam. "He didn't care about the Ho Chi Minh songs," his mother says. "He was too young to remember anything else." Although Thong entered school in the U.S. with the usual number of years of education for his age, he couldn't speak, read, or write English. Because he had left Vietnam in 1983, he was unable to benefit from the PREP program, which was established three years later in Southeast Asia to provide elementary school age refugees with basic English and school skills before arriving in the U.S. His progress was slow—it took him five years to complete two school years.

Today, Thong is a 16-year-old 9th-grade student with a B+ average. When he's not at school or playing soccer—next year he plans to go out for the junior varsity team—Thong works at McDonald's, where he earns $4.20 an hour as a kitchen helper. He has many friends, he says; most are Vietnamese, but his best friend is another Amerasian. For the most part, he gets along with American students, although on a few occasions some students have called him names. "I don't pay any attention to them," he says. "I try to stay away from the troublemakers."

Perhaps it is the example of Thong's stubborn determination and success that led his brother and sister to redirect their lives. At any rate, his brother recently completed a job corps program, while his sister, with encouragement from her boyfriend, returned to high school.

Thong talks with reluctance about his own plans for the future. Only after considerable prodding does he admit his ambition. "I want to go to college and study electrical engineering," he says, laughing nervously at the immodesty of his dream, while his mother, who isn't quite sure what electrical engineering is, smiles proudly.

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*

The Father Search—
Not a Simple Problem of Location and Reunion

ACROSS the U.S., much of the attention focused on the Amerasians arriving from Vietnam has been in terms of their coming "home" to locate and be re-united with their fathers. A popular television talk show devoted an hour to a panel of resettled Amerasians who talked about their desire to find and meet their American fathers. Magazines have featured articles describing emotional reunions of Amerasian offspring and their dads, and the legislation that has enabled the Amerasians to leave Vietnam and enter the U.S. in large numbers is known as the "Amerasian Homecoming Act."

Refugee service providers are not in complete agreement about this aspect of Amerasian resettlement. "They don't jump off the plane saying, 'I want to find my father,' " says one. Another says that the father issue is "no big deal" for most of the Amerasians arriving in his area. On the other hand, there are those who flatly declare, "All want to find their fathers—the issue is always raised."

While perceptions of the issue vary among service providers, experts say virtually all Amerasians would like at least to meet their fathers, even if they don't raise the issue within the first days of resettlement. Sister Marilyn Lacey, author of the 1985 United States Catholic Conference study of Amerasians in the U.S., believes that although Amerasians' desire to be reunited with their fathers may be hidden or suppressed, especially during their initial adjustment to the U.S., it will surface eventually. She tells of one blonde Amerasian child who arrived in 1985: "She appeared to be very well-adjusted, a real success story, but eventually she told us that she is continually in pain because she doesn't know her father." It is true that compared to those arriving in 1985, few Amerasians expect their fathers to be at the airport to greet them when they arrive. Still, "if only to see him for a moment, they want to make the contact," says Sister Lacey. Harvey Steinberg, senior program consultant for International Social Services in New York, agrees. "Whether the child raises reunification as an issue or not, it can't help but be an issue—how it gets expressed depends on many influences," he says. J. Kirk Felsman, a Dartmouth psychologist researching Amerasians' adjustment to the U.S., predicts that for some, finding their fathers "may surface as an important concern when they get older, encountering the developmental issues of getting married and having children of their own."

But not all Amerasians—or American journalists—are aware of the complications involved in such a reunion. A resettlement case manager in the Midwest reported what happened when a Vietnamese woman succeeded in her search for the American man who fathered her child. Over the phone, she asked the man if he loved their Amerasian daughter. He replied, "Of course not. How can I? I've never met her." Downstairs, the child had been secretly listening in on another phone. She was crushed.

E. Glenn Rogers, international program director of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, pointed out at a March 1989 national conference for those resettling Amerasians, "For most Amerasians, the search is very frustrating. Few are able to find the father, and those who locate the fathers may be in for a disappointment because the father does not love them. . . . We have to respect the father's privacy and take him as he is today. . . . The principle of what is best for the child should be applied to all cases of search and/or reunion."

"As Americans, when we hear about a problem, we tend to go right out and find the solutions," says Julie Macdonald, director of Children's Services of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services in New York. "However, in this case we have to go beyond the immediate request—'I want to find my father'—and look at the reasons behind it." Others working with Amerasians agree that the father question needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis. "Just because an interest (in finding the father) has been expressed does not mean that a search should be pursued," cautions Steinberg. Macdonald adds, "Sometimes the request to find the father is a way of asking, 'Will people in the

U.S. accept me more if I'm looking for my father? Will I seem more American to them?' Amerasians can have a tremendous desire to be accepted, to fit in, and in those cases that is the need to be focused on."

There are other complications. The American fathers have been back in the U.S. for over 15 years and have established new lives. Many have American wives and families, and do not want to be faced with consequences of actions long ago in far away Vietnam. There are also legal issues involved, since Amerasians under 18 years of age could theoretically try to establish paternity and sue for financial support. Macdonald cautions that the privacy of the Amerasian refugee needs to be considered as well. It may be no great favor to reunite an eager American father with an Amerasian child who is unprepared for the reality of the situation. And even if the Amerasian may be eager to find his or her father, others in the household—the stepfather, brothers and sisters, and the mother—may be opposed to the idea.

As a response to these issues, the national voluntary agencies' Amerasian Resettlement Program has established a task force, "Consideration for Amerasian Families/U.S. Fathers." The task force recommends that Amerasians requesting reunification with their fathers should contact the local voluntary agency resettling Amerasians in their community. A trained case worker can then provide preliminary counseling and, in consultation with others at the agency, decide whether or not the child—as well as his or her family members—should meet with a counselor trained in handling the issues involved. Among the matters to be discussed are the Amerasian's expectations, the possibility of failure of the search, and the range of possible reactions of the father if found. Although the steps involved may vary from case to case, the task force strongly urges that counseling be a part of the process and that searches not simply be launched in response to requests.

Macdonald, formerly supervisor of counseling services in the PASS program at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC), advises that staff in the overseas training program be realistic when answering an Amerasian's question about finding his or her father, but also to assure that help is available. Since the issue is a long-term one in most cases, she notes, it is not expected that the problems can be resolved during the refugees' six-month stay in the PRPC. Resettlement workers say that the most important service that the training program can perform for Amerasians and their families is to help them adjust their expectations. Already, says Peter Donahoe of Catholic Social Services in Philadelphia, "Most seem to know that they won't be able to find 'Bill from Oregon.' " By all reports, only a very small percentage of the arriving Amerasians have managed to locate and contact their fathers, and an even smaller number have established a sustained relationship with their fathers. ⊠

Matching Fathers with Daughters and Sons

The main institutional effort involved in the "location step" of reuniting American men and their Amerasian children is through the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Refugee Programs, which maintains a computerized file of men who are seeking reunification with their offspring. The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation has been active in publicizing this tracing effort among American men who served in Vietnam. The men supply names and birthdays of the mother and child, sex of the child, their own nicknames, etc. During the interviews which the Joint Voluntary Agency conducts in Vietnam, information is gathered from the Amerasian children and their parents. The process then continues in the U.S. through the cooperative efforts of the voluntry agencies and the American Red Cross.

After completing training in the Philippines, Amerasians may contact the voluntary agency in their U.S. resettlement site to discuss finding their fathers. Through that agency they can receive the necessary counseling and assistance in contacting other resources.

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In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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